

Pundits, scandals and the Russians: Analysing how RT
constructs the notion of a collapsing EU establishment in the
coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections

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<p> Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract </p> <p> RT (aikaisemmin tunnettu nimellä Russia Today) on Venäjän federaation omistama kansainväliselle yleisölle suunnattu tv- ja uutiskanava. RT:tä pidetään yhtenä Venäjän keskeisimpinä valeutisten levittäjänä. Tämä oletus on usein läsnä RT:tä koskevassa tutkimuksessa; sen oletetaan toimivan ainoastaan Kremlin propagandakoneena. Tällainen lähtökohta tutkimuksessa on ongelmallinen, joten tämä tutkimus pyrkii käsittelemään RT:tä itsenäisenä toimijana irrallaan Kremlistä vuoden 2019 Eurovaalien uutisoinnissaan. </p> <p> Venäjän sekaantuminen muiden maiden vaaleihin on ollut suosittu aihe etenkin vuoden 2016 Yhdysvaltojen presidentinvaalien jälkeen. Venäjän väitettiin välittäneen valeuutisia ns. trollitehtaiden avulla sosiaalisessa mediassa sekä RT:n kaltaisten valtiomisteisten uutiskanavien kautta. Valeutisten tarkoituksena oli vaikuttaa ihmisten vaalikäyttäytymiseen sekä aiheuttaa poliittista polarisaatiota. Vuoden 2019 Eurovaaleja pidettiin etenkin monikansallisuutensa vuoksi mahdollisena vaikutusyritysten kohteena, jonka vuoksi kyseiset vaalit valikoituivat tämän tutkimuksen kohteeksi. Sen sijaan, että tässä tutkimuksessa pyritäisiin etsimään merkkejä Venäjältä lähtöisin olevista vaikutusyrityksistä, tutkimus keskittyy siihen, miten RT rakentaa luhistuvan EU-eliitin käsitteen. </p> <p> Tutkimusmateriaalit koostuvat 94 RT:n englanninkielisillä verkkosivuilla julkaistusta uutisartikkelista. Koska tutkimuksessa käsitellään merkitysten rakentamista tekstin ja kielen kautta, teoreettisena viitekehyksenä toimii diskurssiteoria (discourse theory). Tutkimusmetodina toimii diskurssiteoreettinen analyysi (discourse-theoretical analysis), joka hyödyntää diskurssiteoriassa ilmeneviä konsepteja analyysissa. Tutkittaessa luhistuvan EU-eliitin käsitteen muodostumista, keskeisimmiksi konsepteiksi nousevat hegemonia ja antagonismi. Hegemonia viittaa valtaa ylläpitävään diskurssiin, jolla on mahdollista muokata sosiaalista järjestystä. Hegemoniasta syntyy aina sen 'toiseutta' edustava antagonismi, joka pyrkii kumoamaan hegemonisen diskurssin ja siten muuttamaan valtasuhteita. </p> <p> Analyysi osoittaa, että RT:n uutisoinnissa Eurovaaleista hegemonialla viitataan EU-eliittiin (EU establishment), kuten Iso-Britannian konservatiiveihin tai Saksan kristillisdemokraatteihin, sekä valtavirtamediaan, kuten BBC tai The New York Times. Antagonismeiksi nousee siten oikeistopopulistiset (right-wing anti-establishment) puolueet, kuten Brexit Party tai Itävallan vapauspuolue sekä RT:n kaltainen vaihtoehtomedia. RT:n uutisointi EU-eliitistä on enimmäkseen negatiivista, kun taas oikeistopuolueita kuvataan positiivisemmassa mielessä. Valtavirtamedian väitetään olevan puolueellinen EU-eliittiä kohtaan sekä pyrkivän torjumaan oikeistopopulistien menestystä vaaleissa väittämällä, että näillä puolueilla on kytköksiä Venäjälle. RT:n mukaan nämä syytökset ovat perusteettomia sekä keino hyökätä paitsi oikeistopuolueita, myös Venäjää vastaan. Tällä vastaväitteellä pyritään heikentämään valtavirtamedian uskottavuutta. Oikeistopopulistiset puolueet olivat huomattavan menestyksellisiä Eurovaaleissa; muun muassa Iso-Britanniassa Brexit Party sai enemmän ääniä kuin hegemoniset konservatiivi- tai työväenpuolueet. Tämä nähtiin antagonististen diskurssien voittona ja vuosisatoja kestäneen EU-eliitin hegemonian kaatumisena. </p> <p> Tulokset osoittavat, että RT rakentaa 'toisensa', EU-eliitin ja valtavirtamedian, liittämällä siihen konsepteja, kuten "syyttelevä", "vihamielinen", "puolueellinen", "tukahduttava" ja "Venäjän vastainen". Oikeistopopulistiset puolueet sekä vaihtoehtomedia, etenkin RT, näyttäytyvät siten päinvastaisessa valossa. Tulokset lisäävät tietoa RT:stä juurikin osoittamalla, kuinka tämä 'toiseus' rakentuu. Nämä voidaan nähdä keinona lisätä sekä RT:n että oikeistopopulistipuolueiden uskottavuutta lukijoiden silmissä. </p>		
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Abstract

RT (formerly Russia Today) is a Russian state-owned international news broadcaster. It is considered to be one of the Russian government's key means through which mis- or disinformation can be spread. Russia has been accused of spreading disinformation and causing political polarisation through 'troll factories' on social media and state-owned, internationally targeted media outlets such as RT. The presumption that can be found in the existing literature on RT is that it only functions as the Kremlin's propaganda mouthpiece. Such a stance is problematic; hence, this research instead analyses RT's coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections as an independent actor separate from the Kremlin. Due to its transnational nature, the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019 were seen as a potential target of Russian interest and hence chosen as the context of this research. Instead of seeking for signs of Russian intervention, the focus is on how RT constructs the notion of a collapsing EU establishment.

The materials included in this research consist of 94 articles derived from RT's English language website. As the research deals with text and meaning-making, discourse theory forms its theoretical framework, while the method of analysis is discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA). DTA employs the key concepts of discourse theory to guide the analysis. In this context, the main concepts are hegemony and antagonism. Hegemony refers to a discourse that holds power and is able to influence social order. A hegemony always implies an antagonism, which is the hegemony's ultimate 'other' that struggles to overturn the hegemonic discourse in order to shift power relations.

The analysis shows that in this context, hegemony refers to the EU establishment and 'mainstream' media, while antagonism refers to the right-wing anti-establishment and alternative media. The EU establishment and mainstream media are framed as hostile in the articles, as they accuse the anti-establishment having connections to Russia, and RT in particular of being the Kremlin's messenger. The articles provide counter-evidence of the allegations, thereby discrediting the establishment and mainstream media. The electoral success of the anti-establishment parties is framed as ending the centuries-long hegemony of the EU establishment. By framing the EU establishment and mainstream media in such a manner, the anti-establishment and alternative media are mirrored in a more positive light, representing the true will of the people and acting as the bearers of 'truth'. These can be seen as increasing the credibility of the anti-establishment and RT in the eyes of the reader.

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List of abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland; Alternative for Germany
DA	Discourse analysis
DTA	Discourse-theoretical analysis
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
FPO	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs; Freedom Party of Austria
LREM	La République En Marche!; The Republic On the Move
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid; Party for Freedom
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

1. Introduction

Foreign powers meddling elections of other countries is a hot topic both in academia as well as in the media in the context of information warfare. Russia in particular has been at the centre of this discussion. Russia is claimed to have interfered the US presidential election in 2016 (e.g. Bastos and Farkas, 2019; Badawy, Ferrara, and Lerman, 2018; Dutt, Deb, and Ferrara, 2018), French election (e.g. Baines and Jones, 2018) and was alleged to be interested in the transnational European Parliamentary elections in May 2019 (Apuzzo and Satariano, 2019; Burack, 2019).

A considerable number of studies have analysed Russian strategies and tactics of election meddling. It has been shown that Russia has established a ‘troll factory’ located in St. Petersburg, from which a systematic flow of disinformation is spread within social media (e.g. Zannettou, Caulfield, De Cristofaro, Sirivianos, Stringhini, and Blackburn, 2018; Howard, Ganesh, Liotsiou, Kelly, and François, 2018). The trolls are able to mimic real-life people, thus effectively concealing the fact that they are fake accounts spreading disinformation (Bastos and Farkas, 2019). Fake accounts emerge to support both sides of the debate in order to create confusion and cause political polarisation (Bastos and Farkas, 2018; Howard et al., 2018; Stewart, Arif and Starbird, 2018).

In traditional media, the international TV channel and news outlet RT in particular is accused of overtly spreading false information (e.g. Polyakova and Boyer, 2018). Indeed, RT is called the Kremlin’s “propaganda mouthpiece” (Hutchings, 2018: 128). Even a report by the US Intelligence Community Assessment (2017) deemed RT the Kremlin’s primary source of internationally targeted propaganda. RT, along with other international outlets such as Sputnik and domestic media outlets, together with the online trolls are the key building blocks of Russian influence efforts (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2017; Kazakov and Hutchings, 2019). Russia’s known disinformation campaigns have targeted several elections and important events, such as those surrounding the Ukrainian conflict (EU vs Disinfo, 2019; Golovchenko et al., 2018). Indeed, Lankina and Watanabe (2017: 1526) argue that Russia used the media as a foreign policy tool in the events surrounding the Ukrainian conflict. The goals of the disinformation campaigns are to create division, detach fact from fiction and undermine the credibility of Western politics and institutions (Polyakova and Boyer, 2018: 4).

Prior to the European Parliamentary elections in 2019, it was stated that Russia is likely to spread disinformation regarding the elections (e.g. Virtanen, 2019). Indeed, media outlets such as the Finnish national broadcaster YLE (Saraste, 2019) gave instructions on how to detect possible fake news, and encouraged criticism towards Russian state-supported media outlets such as RT. According to the BBC, RT especially was an important tool to spread narrative critical of the establishment and thus promote the anti-establishment (Silva, 2019). The Politico reported in June 2019 that signs of Russian interference were found in the form of fake news, although the extent to which they influenced the results of the election cannot be analysed (Scott and Cerulus, 2019). Hence, given the uniqueness of the multi-national nature of the elections and the prospected Russian interest in it, the European Parliamentary elections provide a valuable case study. The Russian context is of significance due to its role in the contemporary information warfare.

This thesis assesses RT's coverage of the European Parliamentary elections between 19 April 2019 and 19 June 2019. However, this thesis is not about proving or de-proving Russian interference in the elections or an attempt to detect disinformation disseminated during the time period. Instead, this thesis takes a step back and looks at how does RT cover the elections as an independent actor rather than as an assumed Kremlin's propaganda machine. More specifically, this thesis answers the following research question:

How is the notion of a collapsing EU establishment constructed in articles published on RT's English language website?

The reason why this research focuses on the notion of the collapsing EU establishment is due to the assumed victory of populist parties – or right-wing anti-establishment parties, as RT describes them – that was predicted before the elections took place (e.g. Apuzzo and Satariano, 2019).

The EU establishment is defined according to RT's definitions found in the articles. In this case, therefore, the EU establishment refers to the British Conservative Party and Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche (LREM) and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the Netherlands. On the opposing side of the EU establishment is what often is called the populist radical right parties in the field of international relations (see e.g. Mudde, 2007), which RT refers to as the right-wing anti-establishment or simply anti-

establishment, occasionally the populists. Parties in this group include the British Brexit Party, Austrian FPÖ, German AfD, Italian Five Star Movement, The Finns Party and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), to name a few.

The structure of this thesis is the following. Chapter 2 outlines the existing research on RT and identifies a noticeable gap that this research aims to fill. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework and methodology. As this research focuses on meaning-construction through language, Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory is applied. Consequently, the methodology employed is Carpentier's (2007, 2010) discourse-theoretical analysis. As the dataset of articles from the time period is fairly large, the software ATLAS.ti is used to assist in the analysis of the texts. The results are presented in Chapter 4 and discussed in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the research and its findings.

2. RT – More than Kremlin’s propaganda mouthpiece?

This section reviews the existing research on RT. The goal is to outline the basis on which the outlet was founded, and the common strategies it employs in its news coverage. There seem to be disagreements among scholars on RT’s role as a messenger of the Kremlin’s ideas, along with its ability to insert pro-Russian opinions into the minds of its foreign audience. As was mentioned in the introduction, RT is often considered to be the Kremlin’s main source of disinformation disseminated to foreign audiences (Polyakova and Boyer, 2018; Intelligence Community Assessment, 2017). Before making such a conclusion, it is important to look deeper into what RT exactly is, and whether it should instead be investigated as an individual actor.

2.1 An alternative to ‘mainstream’ media

RT is an international broadcaster that was established in 2005, and it is funded by the Russian state. Its content is mainly produced in English, but it also has branches in Arabic, Spanish, French and German (e.g. Borchers, 2011). Up to 2008, the outlet was called Russia Today, after which the name was changed to RT in order to detach from the explicit association with Russia (e.g. Orttung and Nelson, 2019). The main reason for RT’s establishment was to provide an alternative to dominating Western media outlets, such as the BBC, CNN and The New York Times (Orttung and Nelson, 2019; Hutchings, 2018; Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016). Indeed, RT’s editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, has stated that RT “is set to combine a ‘professional format’ of the BBC, CNN and Euronews and to ‘reflect Russia’s opinion of the world’ and present a ‘more balanced picture’ of Russia” (cited in Miazhevich, 2014: 186).

RT primarily broadcasts on television, but it also produces both written and audio-visual content online around the clock (Hutchings, 2018; Miazhevich, 2018). Moreover, Orttung and Nelson (2019) found that RT seems to have a larger audience online than on TV, although many of RT’s televised programmes are uploaded to YouTube. RT itself claims that it has more than a billion page views, which, if true, makes it the most popular news source online (Paul and Matthews, 2016: 2). Hence, it is important to gain an insight into RT’s reporting online, as the majority of existing research concentrates on TV broadcasts.

RT directly states its mission as being an alternative to the hegemony of Western ‘mainstream’ media (e.g. Orttung and Nelson, 2019). This is seen in its tagline, ‘Question more!’, which directly reflects its agenda (Hutchings, 2018). The tagline encourages to not only rely on news

brought by the mainstream media and be sceptical of their narratives. Moreover, RT's mission, as its former name implies, is to promote Russia and bring a Russian perspective to a global audience – thereby challenging the hegemony of Western media and thoughts and providing an alternative truth by covering issues the mainstream media does not touch upon (Yablokov, 2015). With the rise of right-wing anti-establishment politics within the last decade and the loss of trust in the elite, RT claims that objectivity in news reporting has disappeared, and consequently all truth has become relative and subjective (Hutchings, 2017: 213). Mainstream media, in RT's view, is thus not as objective as they perhaps attempt to frame themselves to be – which is why the audience is encouraged to question more.

Because of the questionable links to the Kremlin and the opposition to mainstream media, academic research on RT has been fairly one-sided. However, Hutchings (2018) notes that over the recent years, scholarly interest in RT has been growing, as many now see RT as a credible alternative to Western sources. Arguably, this could be due to recent events that have affected the world as well as Russia, such as the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's alleged meddling with foreign elections.

2.1.1 Common strategies and narratives

When examining research related to RT, or consuming content produced by the outlet, it soon becomes noticeable that RT applies certain strategies and narratives in its productions. Borchers (2011) identified some strategies of how RT aims at persuading its audience to propagate a Russian perspective on events in the context of the construction of Russian-Baltic relations on RT's TV programme *Spotlight*. Multiple strategies are employed to achieve this goal: from choosing the topic and guests to constructing a factual pro-Russian reality of events, thereby creating an image of Russia as the representative of morality and justice, which persuades the audience to align with the Russian perspective (Borchers, 2011: 104-105).

Similarly, Miazhevich (2014) outlines RT's framing of the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in late 2013 to early 2014. In the coverage, it is apparent that RT aims at providing inconsistent viewpoints by establishing narratives from multiple different perspectives. By referring to the protest as Euromaidan, it is possible to appeal to the audience supporting Ukraine. In some articles the Euromaidan represents freedom and democracy; in others, it is framed as an attempt to undermine the Ukrainian government (2014: 187). The coverage also has a strong anti-Western tone and the West is accused of managing or directing the protests (2014: 188).

Moreover, the representation of the (pro-Ukrainian) protesters also moves from images of women and the elderly to aggressive-looking men in masks (2014: 189), turning the overall image of the protesters negative. RT also quotes Russia's foreign minister Lavrov stating that the West is being politically aggressive to Russia (2014: 188). These create an image of the Euromaidan protest as being controlled by the West and used as an opportunity to undermine Russia, thus persuading the reader to be sympathetic towards Russia and critical of the West.

One of RT's main strategies is, thus, to create a pro-Russian narrative through conflicting coverage. Orttung and Nelson (2019), as well as Hutchings and Szostek (2015), claim that RT's main function is to spread pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda. This is done by undermining Western democracy, as was seen in the US presidential election in 2016 while promoting a positive image of Russia, which also separates RT from other international broadcasters. In addition, RT focuses on mistakes made by Western leaders, and accusing the West of interfering in global affairs (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015). These help to attract a wider audience and insert a Russian perspective into its message. However, Orttung and Nelson (2019) and many other researchers fail to define what the notion of a 'Russian perspective' implies. Nevertheless, many seem to agree that particularly in the case of large-scale global events, such as the Sochi Winter Olympics and the Ukrainian crisis, RT uses the opportunity to promote an image of Russia as powerful, unique and the protector of moral values against a decaying West (e.g. Hutchings et al., 2015; Hutchings, 2018; Miazhevich, 2018). Consequently, RT's role in relation to the Russian government's foreign policy goals is often subject to research. According to Paul and Matthews (2016: 5), the main characteristics of contemporary Russian propaganda include false information combined with fractions of truth – which fits into these outlines of RT's strategy, thus strengthening the connection between RT and the Russian government.

2.2 RT as a soft power and public diplomacy tool

RT is, in many instances, deemed a soft power tool employed by the Kremlin (e.g. Miazhevich, 2014; Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016; Watanabe, 2017). Soft power, per Joseph Nye's definition, refers to the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (2004: x). International broadcasting can be viewed as one means through which soft power can be exercised (Hutchings et al., 2015). Recently, Russia has significantly invested into soft power

in order to re-emerge as a great power; in this, RT has a key role in promoting a positive image of Russia abroad (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016). Some argue that the large sums that the Kremlin invests in RT are indicators of its role as a soft power tool and function in the global information warfare (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016; Orttung and Nelson, 2019). Indeed, RT's budget is estimated to be over \$300 million, making it one of Russia's primary news providers (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014: 2; Paul and Matthews, 2016). The considerable amount of funding given to RT does make the link to the government more clear, but does not indicate that as a result RT only functions as the Kremlin's tool.

Others view RT more moderately as a public diplomacy tool. Hans Tuch (1990: 3) defines public diplomacy as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies." Kragh and Åsberg (2017) see the establishment of RT, followed with the establishment of another state-owned international broadcaster Sputnik¹, as measures by Russia to take public diplomacy more seriously. RT's public diplomacy efforts follow the strategies and narratives outlined earlier. RT produces contradicting narratives and even false information in regard to Western actors, such as NATO or EU, as well as during global events, creating a strong us-versus-them juxtaposition (e.g. Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Miazhevich, 2018; Oates, 2018). The production of contradicting narratives involves framing events from opposing sides: "The West is portrayed as weak, but at the same time a near existential threat to Russia" (Kragh and Åsberg, 2017: 788). Indeed, Yablokov (2015) describes RT and its function as a public diplomacy tool as conspiratorial. This element emerges in RT's populist and anti-elitist stance and the attempt to portray a negative image of its 'other', which allows the network to reach domestic audiences particularly in the US (Yablokov, 2015: 311-312) and, arguably, in Europe. Through these measures, RT can thus be seen as affecting the opinions of its audience towards a pro-Russian schema.

Some researchers claim that RT has been successful in its actions as a public diplomacy tool. However, the ways in which success can be measured is questionable. In their analysis of RT's effectiveness on YouTube, Orttung and Nelson (2019) rely on statistical data to provide evidence for RT's success as a public diplomacy tool. Their research found that between 2007

¹ Sputnik is a Russian state-owned, internationally targeted outlet with headquarters in Moscow and regional offices around the world. Sputnik was established in 2014 under the media group Rossiya Segodnya (not to be confused with RT or Russia Today).

and 2017, RT's videos were viewed over four billion times, which is more than the views on BBC or CNN's channels. On average, the videos reached ten to fifteen million views, and one video received an average of 66,000 views (2019: 84-85). These indicate that RT is highly popular online, even more popular than its Western counterparts. However, there should be some scepticism towards statistical data; viewers and subscribers can be bought, and it cannot be assumed that those consuming RT's content only view the channel. Thus, statistics alone cannot provide evidence for RT's success. Yablokov (2015) also questions the ways in which RT's success as a public diplomacy tool can be measured due to the contradicting narratives it produces, thereby discrediting its own reputation.

Watanabe (2017) points out that RT's ability to function as the Kremlin's political tool should be questioned. Too much credit is given to RT's abilities to influence (Galeotti, 2017), although real influence is near-impossible to measure. Mickiewicz (2017) argues that instead of influence or impact, RT's abilities should be discussed in terms of persuasion – meaning a change in attitudes. Mickiewicz continues that RT's persuasion occurs in social media rather than in its own broadcasts. This view is shared by Kazakov and Hutchings (2019) as well as Zanettou et al. (2018). The content originates from RT, yet is disseminated on social media through trolls, fake accounts and real people (Kazakov and Hutchings, 2019; Zanettou et al., 2018) – however, the dissemination is beyond RT's control. Consequently, the focus of the research on RT should concentrate on what kind of narratives are produced by RT without presuming its connection to the Kremlin due to these significant changes in media ecology, as will be detailed in the following section.

2.3 RT as an 'independent' actor

Stephen Hutchings (2018) argues that there have been notable changes in the media ecology that affect the ways in which international broadcasters function. According to Hutchings (also Chatterje-Doody, 2018), with the development of the Internet and particularly social media, the role of the state as the sponsor of the broadcaster has decreased. This, combined with globalisation and the emphasis on the concepts of free will and citizen democracy it has brought, international broadcasters face a 'double paradox': the Internet has brought new platforms to project national influence on, yet the ways in which narratives are distributed among people cannot be controlled. Simultaneously, the broadcasters must be able to maximise the ability to project national influence through these channels while promoting cosmopolitan values to appeal to a wider audience, thereby covering the role of the state in its output

(Hutchings, 2018: 126). Hutchings also argues that “to understand Kremlin strategy requires a more multi-layered understanding of RT’s place in a rapidly transforming global media ecology” (2019: 316). Hutchings does not claim that RT is entirely independent as an actor, but more attention needs to be drawn on reporting conducted by RT without presuming its narratives are mediated by the Kremlin.

The Reframing Russia project, a collaboration between The University of Manchester and The Open University has produced a considerable amount of research on RT that studies the outlet in this specific context. The project argues that RT has a “reputation for being a mouthpiece of Putin’s regime”, but in reality, its function is more complex (Reframing Russia, 2020). The project aims at challenging the conventional presumptions about RT and instead focus on how RT projects Russia’s image abroad and its role in the East-West information war (Reframing Russia, 2020). The themes vary from the commemoration of the 1917 revolution on Twitter (Crilley, Gillespie and Willis, 2019; Hutchings, 2019) to emotions and affective investments in RT’s coverage of the Syrian conflict (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019; 2020).

A common theme that emerges from the changing media ecology is that individual journalists have a large role. According to Tolz, Hutchings, Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2020: 5), broadcasters are allowed to ‘experiment’ in the ways in which they frame particular events due to the better professional knowledge of journalists over politicians. Media executives and the presidential administration hold ‘brain-storming’ meetings rather than the broadcasters simply receiving instructions from the government (Tolz et al., 2020: 5), thus giving individual journalists the ability to improvise suggestions given from above. This makes the connection between RT and the Kremlin less clear to detect. RT’s editor-in-chief Simonyan has stated that RT is an independent broadcaster aiming to provide an alternative, but credible, option to the mainstream media – but maintains close ties to the Kremlin herself (Yablokov, 2015: 306; Tolz et al., 2020). To support the claim of RT’s independence, Simonyan has cited the protest by RT’s former correspondent Abby Martin, as she resigned due to Russia’s military intervention in Crimea and stated to oppose such acts of imperialism (Hutchings, 2018; 2019). Although the protest initially seemed to decrease RT’s credibility, it was successfully turned into evidence against the claims that RT is merely the Kremlin’s propaganda mouthpiece (Hutchings, 2019). Thus, due to the increased role of individual journalists, research on RT should not begin with the presumption that it only represents the Kremlin’s proposed narratives. Instead, it should be investigated what does RT *itself* say and what kind of narratives it produces.

This research follows the idea that RT should be analysed separate from the Kremlin. It differs from pre-existing research firstly by focusing on how RT frames the EU establishment and anti-establishment instead of looking at how Russia is portrayed. Second, the majority of the research on RT focuses on its televised broadcasts. There is thus a gap in research when it comes to examining RT's online output. Orttung and Nelson (2019) examined RT's success on YouTube, and Miazhevich (2014) RT's articles on Euromaidan – but other than that, there is a severe lack of research on the online activities, particularly on news articles published on RT's website. These articles are created immediately after an important event occurs; thus, there is a large quantity of them, providing a valuable platform for analysis. Looking at RT's online coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections in the written form, therefore, fills in the gap, thereby providing a valuable contribution to the growing research on RT. The research also aims at producing a framework for future studies and comprehensive analysis of RT's narratives.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

This research falls in the theoretical framework of discourse analysis (DA). Building on social theory, the field follows the ideas of Foucault, Gramsci and Giddens analysing the role of language in social processes and in the construction of meanings and identities (Flowerdew, 2008; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018). However, the term ‘DA’ is vague and ambiguous, and functions as an umbrella term for multiple different branches with a variety of definitions for ‘discourse’ (see e.g. Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018). The main research question of this study is to analyse the ways in which the notion of a collapsing EU establishment is constructed in articles published on RT’s English language website; consequently, it looks at the construction of meanings through discourse. Thus, this research uses the discourse-theoretical approach that defines discourse as constituting the meaningfulness of all objects and actions, thereby constructing social reality (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Townshend, 2003; Howarth, 2010).

3.1 Discourse theory

Discourse in this understanding, therefore, is not limited to mere utterances, but extended to the processes of meaning- and knowledge-making. Discourse theory thus stems from a poststructuralist ontology. Poststructuralism rejects the notion of a pre-existing reality by moving away from essentialist and scientific conceptualisations of the organisation of social and political life. Instead, it argues that reality is constructed through representations (Howarth, 2013; Thomassen, 2017: 540). Discourse theory focuses on the construction of social or political identities, as well as the relationship that exists between the social, subjectivity and power (Howarth, 2013). In the context of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, RT provides the space in which this construction of identities – the establishment, the people or anti-establishment, mainstream and alternative – and power struggles take place.

Central concepts in discourse theory, and for this research, are hegemony and antagonism. In RT’s coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, hegemony functions on two levels: the hegemony of Western ‘mainstream’ media and the EU establishment Hegemonic discourses, following Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (1971; cited in Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018: 4) outlines discourse and ideology as a means through which power can be exercised. The hegemonic discourse and the power structures that arise from it, then, are able to influence social order and become what constitutes as common sense among the members

of the society (Edkins, 1999; Carpentier, 2018; Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018: 4). In the context of this research, this implies that the Western mainstream media and the EU establishment are seen as having more power than their alternatives, thereby dictating social order.

Hegemonic discourses are formed through nodal points that are able to establish social dominance (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007; Carpentier, 2018). Nodal points are able to partially fix meanings through the process of articulation, which refers to the modification or stabilisation of the identity of an element through combining different words, ideas and concepts together (Howarth, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Jacobs, 2018). However, necessary for meaning-making in discourse theory are floating or empty signifiers, which are not fixed and thus can assume different meanings in different concepts (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007; Dahlberg, 2011). Jacobs (2018: 303-304) describes the relationship between nodal points and empty signifiers as resembling a spider web; the nodal point is located at the heart, and the signifiers form a net around the nodal point.

The nodal points dictate the meanings that are articulated (Jacobs, 2018: 303). The empty signifiers may be related to one another, in which case they form a logic of equivalence – yet, this also brings up the concept of antagonism, as the logic of equivalence inevitably produces a logic of difference, where the signifiers are not related to each other. Consequently, a dichotomy of meanings is produced, which leads to the concept of antagonism. Antagonisms arise to counter the hegemonic discourse. Antagonisms attempt to destabilise the identity of its “other” by forming a logic of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Carpentier, 2018; Jacobs, 2018). Thus, every meaning is constructed through the comparison to its opposite.

In the context of this research, the antagonisms can be identified as RT’s emphasis on the legitimacy of ‘alternative’ media outlets. This is strongly present in RT’s rhetoric, as its identity is constructed around providing a different perspective from what Western mainstream media outlets provide. Another antagonism is the support for the populist right parties, as these are the opposite of what RT considers the EU establishment. The main nodal points that can be identified in this context are, thus, ‘mainstream media’, ‘alternative media’, ‘the establishment’ and ‘the anti-establishment’. By themselves, these concepts simultaneously mean nothing and anything, depending on the signifiers and contexts they are attached to. Therefore, to assess the

ways in which RT constructs the notion of a collapsing EU establishment, the articulation of these concepts must be deconstructed.

Discourse theory has been applied to research on RT by Hutchings (2018) in the analysis of recursive Russian nationhood. In the research, the concept that was employed was articulation; how the Russian nationhood is constructed (Hutchings, 2018: 134). Hutchings continues that RT “posits its leading role in the counter-hegemonic struggle as the ‘part’ that embodies the ‘whole’, as evidenced by the gloss on its news mission that appears on RT’s website” (2018: 135). RT’s status as a driving antagonistic force to counter the hegemony of mainstream media has been touched upon (e.g. Orttung and Nelson, 2019; Yablokov, 2015), but not as in-depth as in this research.

3.2 Methodology: Discourse Theoretical Analysis

Discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA; e.g. Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007) focuses on macro-level contextual and textual approaches. This implies that, as in discourse theory, what constitutes as text can range from spoken discourse to official documents, mass media texts or broadcasts, and the like (Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018). In this research, as will be elaborated on section 3.2.2 of this chapter, the research materials – articles from RT’s English language website – are analysed as text. The macro-textual approach focuses on meanings, representations and ideologies; consequently, the macro-context refers to “the social as the realm where the processes of the generation meaning are situated” (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007: 277). The macro-context in this study, thus, refers to the international news-broadcasting arena.

Carpentier (2010; 2018; also Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007) advocates the use of DTA in media studies, in which it has not been widely applied due to the highly political nature of discourse theory. The media can be seen as a producer, reproducer or influencer of social phenomena, instead of merely as a reflector of the social (Carpentier, 2010: 274). RT can thus be perceived as a system that constructs, maintains and disseminates identities. Commonly, in a discourse-theoretical approach to political or policy studies, the approach is used to uncover power structures, hierarchies, hegemonic struggles and inclusions or exclusions (Howarth, Glynos and Griggs, 2016). However, since the media can be perceived as shaping the social order and thus power relations, the discourse-theoretical approach can be applied outside the

political context. Indeed, Carpentier (2010: 278) argues that the strength of DTA lies in its ability to examine the construction of political identities, such as those representing ‘the establishment’ and ‘the anti-establishment’; DTA helps to discover the ways in which the relationships between representations and identities contribute to the production of meanings.

As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, RT’s construction of the notion of a collapsing EU establishment will be analysed by identifying central nodal points. By looking at how these nodal points – such as ‘mainstream media’, ‘alternative media’, ‘the establishment’ and ‘the anti-establishment’ – are applied to different contexts to represent different meanings, the underlying hegemonic structures can be discovered. Moreover, it will be investigated if, and how, certain people that appear frequently in the news coverage function as nodal points. Such examples are Brexit Party’s Nigel Farage, who could be perceived as representing the alternative; both in the sense of alternative media due to the vast number of positive articles related to him, and as a representative of the anti-establishment movement. The Conservatives Theresa May and Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, for instance, instead represent the Western mainstream media and the establishment.

Based on the pre-existing research on RT outlined in the previous chapter, it can be hypothesised that the dominance of the EU establishment in European politics and Western mainstream media in the international broadcasting arena can be seen as the hegemonic practices. The rise and success of the anti-establishment parties in the elections, as well as the popularity of alternative media outlets such as RT, can be seen as the antagonistic practices aiming to destabilise the hegemonic order. Indeed, according to Jacobs (2018), the discourse-theoretical approach is an especially valuable tool of analysis when examining populism, due to the clear antagonistic dichotomy of ‘the people’ against ‘the establishment’.

As with all methodologies, DTA has its limitations. DTA is based on interpretation, and therefore it can never be fully objective. The subjective position of the researcher will always be present and will have some implications on the results. However, the deductive coding and the employment of the software ATLAS.ti help minimise this effect. Another limitation is that using concepts from discourse theory provide a fairly narrow view on the topic rather than a holistic picture.

3.2.1 Materials

The main research materials are articles related to the 2019 European Parliamentary elections published on RT's English language website. The articles are derived through a keyword search with the command "European parliament". The data set will be collected from the time period of 19th April 2019 until 19th June 2019; this includes coverage from the campaigning period, the actual elections, as well as its aftermath. Thus, a holistic picture of RT's coverage of the election will be given.

From the time period, a total of 112 articles were found. From this set, 18 articles were excluded from the analysis, as they were not related to the European Parliamentary elections. Articles that were not explicitly about the elections, but focused on an EU member state were included, as the elite-people juxtaposition was often present in these, thereby reflecting the interests of this research. Thus, a total of 94 articles was included in the final dataset.

As this research contains a large amount of data, the software ATLAS.ti will be used in their analysis. The software assists in the coding of the texts and organising the materials into groups in order to identify hegemonic and antagonistic discourses. The combination of computational and qualitative methods will increase the validity and objectivity of the results of the research.

The articles were first converted to Word documents, after which they were uploaded into the software. The coding process began by reading all of the articles and deducing codes from the texts. The deductive coding, rather than inductive coding, ensures that the bias of the author is restricted. After the initial reading of all the articles was complete, the articles were read again and the codes that emerged from articles published later in the time frame were inserted to the articles published at the beginning of the time frame. After the articles were coded, the software was used to establish code-code relationships to see which articles are interlinked and thus suitable for closer analysis. The analysis itself was conducted manually.

4. Analysis

Before discovering the hegemonic and antagonistic discourses that emerged during the European parliamentary elections, an overview of the materials collected from the time period of 19 April 2019-19 June 2019 is presented. The dataset of 94 articles was divided into three groups according to the month of publication (Table 1).

Table 1 Grouping of RT articles in the dataset

Month	Total n. of articles	Most articles published in one day
April	10	2
May	71	7
June	13	2

In April, 10 articles related to the European parliamentary elections were published. The majority of articles, 71, were published in May. In June, 13 articles were published. The most articles published during one day (7) was on May 22nd. On most days, only one or two articles related to the elections were published.

As was stated in Chapter 3.2, the codes were deduced from the text. The full list of codes can be found in Appendix 1. Figure 1 shows the five most reoccurring codes.

Figure 1 Most reoccurring codes



The number after the title of the code refers to the number of times it occurs in the dataset. The most occurring code is thus 'Negative portrayal of "establishment"'. Additionally, the articles commonly portray a conflict between the right-wing anti-establishment parties (in the list of codes referred to as 'populists') as well as discuss allegations about Russia's interference.

A reoccurring theme among the articles is Brexit, and Nigel Farage is often discussed as a reference to it. Other reoccurring themes are a juxtaposition between France's Marine Le Pen and president Emmanuel Macron, as well as allegations of Russian interference in the elections.

Finally, it should be noted that in some examples, RT employs the term 'narrative' – for example "Brussels' narrative of a united, integrated Europe" (27.5.2019a). Narrative in this context refers to the story that Brussels aims at creating for the EU. In this research, however, the term 'narrative' is methodological and an approach through which this data is analysed.

4.1 Neutrality, ambiguity and contradictions

One observation that can be made from the dataset is that the majority of the articles appear to be written – at least on the first round of reading – in a neutral tone. This contradicts the assumption that RT only acts as Kremlin's propaganda machine. Only a handful of articles, which will be discussed later, have a stronger, explicit pro-Russian tone that can immediately be observed, as presented in previous research on RT. An example of a neutral article is written on Brexit talks (17.5.2019a). The article merely discusses the challenges the then-prime minister Theresa May had in drafting a Brexit deal from the perspective of the Labour party:

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has written a letter to UK PM Theresa May claiming cross-party Brexit talks to find a compromise solution had failed due to "the increasing weakness and instability" of her Tory government. (17.5.2019a)

The text does not directly attack either of the parties (Conservatives or Labour), instead merely presenting that both sides were unable to find a solution for the issue.

Another neutral article discusses the basics of the European parliamentary elections, describing what one should know (23.5.2019d). The article provides an overview of the key issues that emerged in the campaigning, the timeline for voting as well as what the MEPs do in practice. The article also discusses the possible victory of "right-wing and anti-establishment parties" (23.5.2019d). Yet, the possible emergence of such parties as the winners was well-known ahead of the elections (Apuzzo and Satariano, 2019). The article gives background information as to why this is the case: "The Parliament is further divided along political affiliation, not nationality" (23.5.2019d). The article does not encourage voting in a certain direction or overtly support any specific political group, thus remaining neutral.

A second observation is that many of the articles appear neutral at first, but upon further reading turn ambiguous. This means that it is not clear whether the article attempts to neutrally present an issue, or to encourage the reader to think (and possibly act) in a certain manner. Based on the articles in the dataset, the fine line between neutrality and non-neutrality is crossed in the middle or towards the end of the article; the beginning may seem neutral. Often ambiguity emerges with reference to what RT calls right-wing anti-establishment parties. In a way, the article appears to be giving a negative portrayal of such parties, yet simultaneously emphasising their success in the EP elections.

An example of such an article was written on the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany (28.5.2019e). In the article, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is quoted to oppose the rising anti-Semitism in Germany and attributing it to the rise of right-wing parties such as AfD. The article mentions that parties like AfD do, indeed, attract members with such beliefs. However, the article also mentions that:

After several years of missing the threshold to enter Germany's parliament, AfD finally won 94 seats in the Bundestag in 2017, riding a wave of popular anger at Merkel's 2015 decision to let more than a million migrants enter Germany. The party has been accused of harboring racists and anti-Semites, but some accuse the new arrivals to Germany of bringing religious hatred of their own. (28.5.2019e)

By stating that AfD *finally* was able to enter the Bundestag the ambiguity can be perceived; it can almost be interpreted as a positive occurrence. The “new arrivals to Germany” bringing their own “religious hatred” also can be seen as a subtle attempt to justify anti-Semitism. With these, the article moves from neutral to opinionated. Moreover, the text can be seen to imply that religious hatred is justified by Merkel's decision to let in a large number of migrants, and the anger that the decision sparked among the population led to the rise of AfD. It is not thus AfD that is spreading the anti-Semitic sentiments, but rather self-inflicted by Merkel. Yet, these are not explicitly clear in the text, therefore gaining the notion of ambiguity.

Contradictions can also be found from the articles in the dataset. An example of news articles contradicting themselves are from April, when a UKIP candidate, Carl Benjamin, posted a video where he used controversial and racist language. The first article on the topic (26.4.2019a) gives the reader the feeling that the actions and language by Benjamin are condemned by RT:

A now-deleted video from 2015, obtained by anti-fascist group Hope not Hate, shows Benjamin repeatedly using vile racial slurs as well as insults [...] the self-styled “free

speech” YouTuber, who has over 950,000 subscribers, stood by his comments, insisting:

“Personally, I find racist jokes funny. (26.4.2019a; emphasis in original text)

The sense of condemnation comes from the use of the adjective *vile*, as well as by putting the term free speech in quotation marks. To a reader, these seem to imply that the author of the article does not agree with Benjamin’s defence that he is only exercising his right to free speech when he uses racial slurs.

However, in the second article posted on the same topic on the same day (26.4.2019b), the tone is very different. The article tells how the Twitter account of Carl Benjamin was deleted due to his use of racist language. This was claimed to be ‘meddling’ and ‘censorship’ by Benjamin’s campaigning staffer. The article continues:

Benjamin has come under attack by the media and establishment politicians, who have accused him of “*racist*” speech. [...] He was banned from Facebook and Instagram in February over alleged “*hate speech*.” (26.4.2019b; emphasis in original text)

The reader now gets the sense that banning Benjamin’s Twitter account was not justified and even an attempt by “the media and establishment politicians” to silence his voice in the elections. These are implied by putting the terms “*racist*” and “*hate speech*” in quotation marks and italics, as well as stating that Benjamin’s rhetoric was only allegedly hate speech. It is also not clarified what media or establishment politicians have made these accusations. Compared to the previous article, the author appears to be on Benjamin’s side and encourage the readers to question Twitter’s decision to ban his account in the name of free speech – even though the article published beforehand seemed to reject the idea that such language can be justified by referring to the right to free speech.

An interesting, exceptional article is written by philosopher Slavoj Žižek. In his article, Žižek is critical of both the anti-establishment and the establishment, instead calling for unity among the ‘pan-European left’:

[...] populism is merely a reaction to the failure of Europe’s liberal establishment to remain faithful to Europe’s emancipatory potentials, by offering a false way out of ordinary people’s troubles.

So the only way to really defeat populism is to submit the liberal establishment itself, its actual politics, to ruthless critique. The radical leftist new beginning is thus the only way to save Europe – but which left? Not the emerging populist left of strong nation-states but a truly pan-European left. (2.6.2019b)

Zizek thus sees populism as something that should be defeated and sees the rise of right-wing anti-establishment parties as a reaction to the failure of the establishment to listen to the people of Europe. This is the only article in the dataset that is explicitly critical of both the establishment and anti-establishment, as well as supportive of the political left. The article appears contradictory if multiple RT articles are read consecutively; however, if a person was to read only this article, RT could appear as a neutral news outlet covering all aspects of issues. It could thus be argued that such an article is published in order to increase the credibility of the claims that RT is an independent broadcaster.

It is thus not uncommon to find neutral articles from RT's website. However, occasionally follow-up articles even during the same day may completely contradict what was said beforehand, which can sometimes leave the reader confused. Occasionally the article turns from neutral to non-neutral within a single article. As discussed in Chapter 2, these are familiar strategies for RT. Understanding these aspects assist in the search for hegemonic and antagonistic discourses in terms of the establishment vs. the populists and mainstream media vs. alternative media. The following sections will analyse these in the context of the European Parliamentary elections, as RT makes a clear distinction between the establishment and anti-establishment, as well as mainstream media and alternative media.

4.2 Two dimensions of hegemony and antagonism

The first dimension in which hegemonic and antagonistic discourses are identified is the narrative of 'the establishment' against 'the anti-establishment'. The second dimension is that of 'mainstream' media versus 'alternative' media.

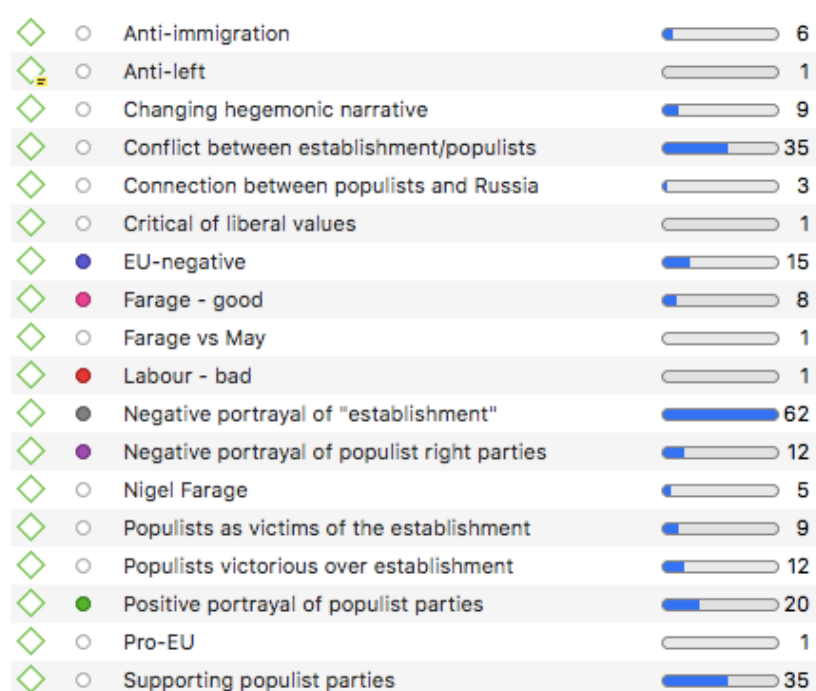
The story that unfolds during the time period selected for this research is one of the underdogs becoming victorious over those who have typically held the power. In this case, those with the power is what RT calls 'the establishment' – referring to parties with a long history that have almost always held key positions in the parliament. Such parties, that reoccur in this story, include the Conservatives (Tories) from the UK as well as their leader, prime minister Theresa May and French president Emmanuel Macron's party LREM. On the other side, there are what RT calls 'anti-establishment' or 'right-wing' parties. These include the Brexit Party with their leader Nigel Farage as well as French National Front and the leader Marine Le Pen. It is noteworthy that parties belonging to this group gain more coverage than parties in the

‘establishment’ group – such as Austrian FPÖ, Danish Stram Kurs, German AfD or Italy’s Five Star Movement. Giving more coverage to one group than for another, the one with more coverage becomes more salient. Salience in news media is able to influence the way in which the readers or audience think (e.g. Chyi and McCombs, 2004); in this context, giving more coverage to the anti-establishment parties makes them appear more important in the eyes of the reader.

4.2.1 “Fed up with fake democracy” – fall of the EU establishment and rise of the right-wing anti-establishment

Figure 2 shows the list of codes attributed to the first dimension that juxtaposes the establishment against the anti-establishment.

Figure 2 List of codes in dimension one



In this group, the majority of the codes refer to the negative portrayal of the establishment and support for the anti-establishment, as well as to the conflict between these two.

In RT’s narrative, the European establishment holds the hegemonic position in European politics, thus dictating the direction in which the EU is heading. One way in which the hegemony of the establishment is challenged is by framing it in a negative manner. For instance, in one article the establishment is referred to as “the super rich and the financiers” (13.5.2019a).

The same article also states that “83 percent of Britain’s voters believe they have been *“let down by the entire political establishment”* (13.5.2019a; emphasis in original text). The EU is criticised for not following the basic principles of democracy by comparing re-voting in the EU and in Turkey, for instance (7.5.2019c). In the article, the EU’s Brexit negotiator Guy Verhofstadt calls the rerun of a local election in Istanbul as a step towards dictatorship. The article then mentions that:

The irony in Verhofstadt’s outrage, is that the EU itself has a long history of either totally ignoring referendum votes — or just making people vote again until the ‘correct’ result is achieved. But that, of course, does not make the EU a dictatorship. It’s still a *“bastion of hope, freedom, prosperity & stability”* (as per another recent Verhofstadt tweet). (7.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

It is thus implied that the EU itself could be seen as taking steps towards becoming a dictatorship, or at least that the establishment is willing to re-vote on decisions until the result that they desired for is reached. Yet, according to the article, when it is the establishment that does this, it is framed as freedom and prosperity instead of an act of dictatorship. The article thus criticises the establishment for following its own agenda instead of listening to the wishes of the people and being blind for its own actions.

The right-wing anti-establishment parties, the antagonists, are portrayed in a much more positive manner. Their growing support is reported throughout the campaigning:

A recent study by the Bertelsmann Foundation has claimed that one in 10 Europeans will back right-wing and anti-establishment parties in the upcoming EU elections, pointing to growing support for Euroskeptic movements across the bloc. (11.5.2019b)

British Euroskeptic Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party is set to pick up the most votes in the UK, beating both the Conservatives and Labour Party combined in one poll. In France, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally is edging past pro-EU Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche! party, while Italian Matteo Salvini has predicted a historic victory for *“the politics of good sense”* (19.5.2019b; emphasis in original text)

Particularly in the case of Nigel Farage’s Brexit party, it is often mentioned that the party is projected to make considerable wins, crushing the hegemony of the Conservatives and Labour.

Nigel Farage and his Brexit Party can be seen as emerging as the heroes of the story. In a way, Farage acts as the antagonistic discourse that is able to challenge and eventually change the hegemonic discourse:

Desperate spin notwithstanding, the tsunami created by Nigel Farage's six-week old Brexit Party may sweep away centuries-old parties which may now begin to split into their constituent parts. (27.5.2019b)

Registered just three months before the election, on February 5, the Brexit Party quickly gained momentum on the back of growing frustration with May and the Tories' failure to deliver the long-awaited split from the EU. (26.5.2019c)

Established only weeks prior to the EP elections, Farage's Brexit Party is able to become victorious over centuries-old establishment parties. This can be taken as 'proof' that the anti-establishment parties represent the true wishes of the people and have been able to assume the hegemonic position. Indeed, the electoral success of the anti-establishment parties is portrayed as being able to change the hegemonic narrative:

[...] the election results present a serious challenge to Brussels' narrative of a united, integrated Europe. (27.5.2019a)

He [Farage] gave the ruling elites, conspiring to wreck Brexit and defy the voters, just enough rope. And now they have hanged themselves. (27.5.2019b)

The election has revealed an uncomfortable truth for Europe's traditional political parties: voters are no longer satisfied with the status quo. More radical, pro-active parties are siphoning votes from the mainstream political establishment. (27.5.2019d)

All across the Western world, people have lost trust in the traditional parties that have dominated politics of the post-war world. (28.5.2019b)

Thus, RT constructs a narrative of the underdogs, the Eurosceptic right-wing anti-establishment parties, being able to mobilise the true sentiments of the people of Europe, thereby shifting the hegemony away from the hands of the establishment.

4.2.2 'Mainstream' media versus alternative media

A parallel story that unfolds is 'mainstream' media trying to silence 'alternative' media outlets such as RT, which is the second dimension of hegemony-antagonism. The mainstream media – namely the BBC – is often discredited.

Figure 3 List of codes in dimension two



Figure 3 shows the codes attributed to the second dimension. As could be assumed, the most reoccurring codes refer to discrediting Russia's interest in the elections as well as discrediting mainstream media. The code 'Russian interference' was attached to cases in which explicit accusations of Russia's attempts were made – and often these accusations were made by the mainstream media.

Mainstream media outlets are criticised for being biased towards the establishment and trying to hide the success of the anti-establishment parties. Thus, the mainstream media outlets are claimed to put out non-factual news, while accusing alternative media outlets of doing the same thing without any proof. An example of this can be seen in an article covering Nigel Farage's interview with the BBC, in which the BBC was claimed to ask irrelevant questions, instead trying to portray in a certain (negative) manner. Farage responded by stating that:

"Here we are with one of the biggest changes in politics that's ever occurred and you've [sic] not even interested. What is wrong with the BBC? What is wrong with the BBC?" he asked. (12.5.2019b; emphasis in original text)

Here, it is brought to attention that the BBC is refusing to accept the significant change in the political field, instead attempting to divert the issue by focusing on other issues. Quoting Farage asking "what is wrong with the BBC" encourages the reader to be wary of the broadcaster's intentions.

RT also frames itself as being under attack by both the establishment and mainstream media. This is done especially with reference to alleged Russian interference. In one article, RT and other Russian media outlets were blamed for growing EU discontent:

“The elections have featured prominently in media outlets funded by the Kremlin, including broadcaster RT and the Sputnik news agency.”

It’s almost like we are an international news outlet, or something, covering an internationally-important story! (22.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

For years the European establishment has been sounding the alarm about a seemingly ever-imminent Russian interference campaign in European politics. Accusations against Russian media and, specifically RT, often took center stage. (22.5.2019c)

RT is, therefore, framed as a victim of both the establishment as well as mainstream media. RT claims that it is merely an international news outlet covering important news, yet still receives accusations about being a means through which Russia aims at influencing foreign audiences. This simultaneously is an attempt to discredit the mainstream media, while encouraging the audience to instead trust alternative outlets such as RT. By doing this, RT is attempting to challenge the hegemony of the mainstream media.

4.3 “The Russians are coming!” Hegemony and antagonism in relation to alleged Russian interference

All of the above are entangled together in the news coverage on alleged Russian interference. Figure 4 shows the relationships between the codes assigned to both dimensions of hegemony and antagonism. As can be seen, many of them are connected to each other. Based on the figure, it can be seen that the negative portrayal of the establishment is connected to the dimension of mainstream media against alternative media, for instance. Articles that imply a conflict between the establishment and anti-establishment (here described as ‘populists’) is associated with the anti-establishment becoming victorious over the establishment, Russian interference and framing the anti-establishment as victims of the establishment. Moreover, RT’s attempts to discredit the allegations regarding Russian interference are associated with RT being framed as a target of hostility by the establishment, while also implying attempts to discredit mainstream media.

The diagram illustrates a semantic network of concepts related to populism and Russia. The nodes are represented by colored boxes with a diamond icon and text. The relationships are indicated by arrows with labels such as "is part of", "is associated with", "is cause of", and "contradicts".

Nodes and their relationships:

- EU-negative** (blue box) is associated with **Connection between populists and R...** (grey box).
- Connection between populists and R...** (grey box) is part of **Changing hegemonic narrative** (grey box).
- Changing hegemonic narrative** (grey box) is part of **Conflict between establishment/populists** (grey box).
- Conflict between establishment/populists** (grey box) is part of **Negative portrayal of populist right parties** (purple box).
- Negative portrayal of populist right parties** (purple box) is part of **Discrediting allegations about Russia's involvement** (grey box).
- Discrediting allegations about Russia's involvement** (grey box) is part of **Pro-Russia** (grey box).
- Pro-Russia** (grey box) is part of **Defensive tone** (grey box).
- Defensive tone** (grey box) is part of **Reference to meddling** (grey box).
- Reference to meddling** (grey box) is part of **Negative portrayal of "establishment"** (grey box).
- Negative portrayal of "establishment"** (grey box) is part of **Counter-accusation of meddling** (orange box).
- Counter-accusation of meddling** (orange box) is part of **Populists as victims of the establishment** (grey box).
- Populists as victims of the establishment** (grey box) is part of **Positive portrayal of populist parties** (green box).
- Positive portrayal of populist parties** (green box) is part of **RT as a target** (grey box).
- RT as a target** (grey box) is part of **Russian interference** (grey box).
- Russian interference** (grey box) is part of **Discrediting mainstream me...** (yellow box).
- Discrediting mainstream me...** (yellow box) is part of **Mainstream vs. alternative...** (grey box).
- Mainstream vs. alternative...** (grey box) is part of **Populists victorious over establishment** (grey box).
- Populists victorious over establishment** (grey box) is part of **Conspiracy** (grey box).
- Conspiracy** (grey box) is part of **Supporting populist parties** (grey box).
- Supporting populist parties** (grey box) is part of **Russia under attack** (grey box).
- Russia under attack** (grey box) is part of **Connection between populists and R...** (grey box).

The diagram shows a complex web of relationships between these concepts, with many nodes having multiple incoming and outgoing connections. The relationships are often hierarchical, with some nodes being part of others, while others are associated with or cause others.

The theme of alleged Russian interference can be divided into two parts: the news coverage of the so-called Austrian scandal, which will be discussed below, as well as the attempts to de-proof the alleged Russian interest in the elections.

The Austrian scandal refers to the leaking of a video on May 18th, 2019. The video, filmed in secret in 2017, allegedly shows the vice-chancellor of Austria, Heinz-Christian Strache of the FPÖ, discussing a deal with the niece of a Russian oligarch (18.5.2019a). According to the BBC

(2019), Strache discusses an illegal donation system for his party with the woman, who is interested in investing in Austria. The Russian woman

offers to buy a 50% stake in Austria's Kronen-Zeitung newspaper and switch its editorial position to support the FPÖ. In exchange, Mr Strache said he could award her public contracts [...] The vice-chancellor also speculates that the Russian's takeover of Kronen-Zeitung could boost support for the party to as high as 34%. (BBC, 2019)

The deal would thus benefit the FPÖ considerably. Additionally, according to the New York Times (Schuetze, 2019), Strache also mentions that he has met with Russian president Putin's advisors in order to sketch a strategic collaboration, as well as states that he wishes to build a media landscape similar to what Viktor Orban did in Hungary. The scandal eventually led to Strache's resignation as vice-chancellor and as the leader of the FPÖ (Schuetze, 2019; 18.5.2019b).

The stance that RT takes in the scandal is that the taping of the conversation was a set-up. RT claims that there is no evidence that the woman was actually a Russian oligarch's niece:

[...] some pundits already had their usual Russiagate meltdowns, alleging the tape proves that the FPÖ was bought and paid-for by Moscow, which conspired with the right-wing party to destroy Austria's freedom of the press. The *pièce de résistance* in this claim is that the woman Strache and Gudenus talked with is described as a "*suspected Russian oligarch niece*." (18.5.2019a; emphasis in original text)

Thus, in RT's view, the event is merely a chance for the self-proclaimed experts, 'pundits', to prove that the right-wing anti-establishment parties are connected to Russia. As the woman at the heart of the scandal is only alleged to be of Russian origin, the event is framed as the anti-establishment as being under an attempt to harm their campaigning, as the video was released just days ahead of the European Parliamentary election:

He [Strache] insisted that he and his fellow party member Johann Gudenus, who took part in the controversial meeting, were victims of a long-running smear campaign, which culminated in the release of the "*illegally recorded*" footage. (18.5.2019b; emphasis in original text)

Indeed, Strache claims that the woman was actually a Latvian citizen (18.5.2019b), which would support this view.

The tone RT adopts in its coverage of the scandal is fairly defensive. Instead of giving a neutral analysis of what occurred, the focus is on attempting to discredit the mainstream media's claims that the FPÖ is connected with the Russian government:

In 2016, the FPO also committed a ‘sin’ by signing a ‘friendship treaty’ with the ruling United Russia party. Now, Die Welt says the European security services fear their secrets could have already ended up with the Russians... regardless of whether or not any proof exists. (18.5.2019c)

RT focuses on emphasising the lack of proof of the woman’s country of origin and appears to be defending FPO in the scandal. In this, RT challenges the hegemony of the so-called mainstream media by reacting to their coverage of the scandal and identifying instances in which evidence for Russian involvement is not presented.

The blame is instead put on the establishment, claiming that the ‘strategic’ leakage of the video plays well in their hands, as stated by a University of Gottingen professor, Peter Schulze, who was interviewed by RT:

"Such a scandal plays very well into the hands of establishment parties elsewhere in Europe and there's another element involved in this because they can basically kill two flies with one blow: it's against the populism in Europe in general, and, of course, against Russia"
(21.5.2019a; emphasis in original text).

The hegemonic discourse in this case, thus, is one alleged to be adopted by the establishment; that Russia and populism are dangerous and should be eliminated. The antagonistic discourse adopted by RT is to reveal the intentions of the establishment and the radical measures they are willing to take in order to maintain their hegemonic position. Consequently, the anti-establishment parties – along with Russia – are portrayed as the victims of the establishment. Yet, the scandal is portrayed to have little to no effect on the election results:

The leak *"will have some effect and, probably, [Strache's right-wing] Freedom party (FPO) will lose some points when it comes to polling day on Sunday, but it won't have the big effect that some others hope it will have on the right spectrum of the political agenda,"* he [Hugh Bronson of AfD] said. (21.5.2019a; emphasis in original text)

However, if the intent was to discredit the European right, the plan could be considered a failure. Nationalist and right-wing parties delivered a good performance across Europe, helping defeat the combined majority of the European Parliament’s center-right EPP and center-left S&D blocs. (28.5.2019c)

RT thus frames the anti-establishment parties as being able to rise from the ashes despite the establishment’s efforts. The hegemony of the EPP and S&D was eventually beaten by the anti-establishment parties by gaining more votes than the two blocs combined.

To finalise the story, RT presents proof that the alleged Russian woman was actually a Bosnian student who was paid to set up the scene (28.5.2019c).

In the video, shot in Ibiza in 2017, the woman plies Strache with alcohol, and according to Austrian tabloid Krone, harder drugs to “*loosen his tongue.*” She then offers to buy a 50 percent stake in the country’s Kronen Zeitung newspaper and switch its editorial position in favor of Strache’s Freedom Party (FPO). (28.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

Strache was thus given drugs and alcohol by the woman in order to frame him and capture suspicious actions by him. Interestingly, however, according to this article, the report in which the woman’s ‘real’ identity was revealed was published by the newspaper in the middle of the scandal, Kronen Zeitung. Still, RT emphasises that the mainstream media bought the ‘fake’ story:

The media bought it, with pundits panicking over the Russian plot to “*destroy the free press*” and sounding the alarm on how the European right is “*secretly on the take from Russia.*” (28.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

This can be seen as an attempt to discredit the hegemony of the mainstream media, and instead portray RT, the antagonist, as revealing the ‘truth’.

To add credit to this view, an article written by journalist Neil Clark was published in the aftermath of the elections:

[...] the timing of the release of the video is surely significant. It came just days before the European Parliament elections and bolstered perfectly the dominant narrative that Russia interferes in domestic European politics to help boost the chances of right wing/nationalist parties across the continent in order to weaken the EU. -- But you don’t have to be a supporter of the FPO’s right-wing politics (and I’m not), to question whether or not there is a wider agenda, which suits very nicely those out to prevent closer links between European countries and Russia. (30.5.2019a)

By giving the opinion of a neutral party, who explicitly states that he does not support the FPO but condemns the release of the video, the narrative of the establishment attempted to attack right-wing anti-establishment parties and simultaneously Russia gains legitimacy. It no longer appears only as the view of the antagonistic alternative news outlet, but as a generally acceptable notion.

4.3.2 “Just don’t ask for proof” - Countering allegations about Russian interference

The defensive tone becomes stronger in the efforts to counter or de-proof the allegations about Russia’s involvement in the elections. Here, Russia is often framed as a victim of (liberal)

Western hostility. The West, on the other hand, is accused of spreading false information about Russia's potential interference. An example of this can be found well before the European Parliamentary elections; an article titled *The Russians are coming for European elections! Just don't ask for proof* (12.5.2019c).

The article, written by RT's Irish journalist Graham Dockery, refers to another article written by the New York Times, which warns about Russian hackers meddling in the upcoming elections:

Those dastardly Russian hackers are alive and well and meddling in the upcoming European Parliament elections, warned the New York Times. Just don't expect to see any proof, because the paper offers none. (12.5.2019c)

The purpose is thus to discredit the New York Times, claiming that it has no evidence that such hackers exist, nor that they are seeking to interfere in the European elections. The only evidence that the New York Times has, according to Dockery, is a former FBI analyst Daniel Jones, whom Dockery claims to have close ties with the American Democratic party. Dockery mentions another expert, Atlantic Council's Ben Nimmo, who has "identified thousands of 'Russian-linked' Twitter accounts, based on some thoroughly dodgy methodology" (12.5.2019c). Consequently, the methods used to uncover Russian links in Twitter accounts are discredited, although there is a substantive amount of evidence supporting these findings (e.g. Zanettou et al., 2018; Badawy, Ferrara and Lerman, 2018; Bastos and Farkas, 2019). Dockery mentions that the rise in the support for populist parties is merely due to the people's dissatisfaction with the status quo, and not a result of Russian interference as the European establishment claims:

But nope, it's all a sinister Russian plot to undermine democracy. Let's go with that one. (12.5.2019c)

It can therefore be seen that the article attempts to both discredit the hegemonic position held by the mainstream media by uncovering its deficiencies, as well as the establishment by accusing it of fearmongering.

Two other articles in the dataset follow this same story. The establishment is attempting to draw connections between the right-wing anti-establishment parties and Russia in order to halt the rise of populism:

With European Parliament elections looming, the establishment parties and mainstream media are reaching for the playbook of US Democrats and hyping the specter of ‘Russia’ to drive voters away from the rising tide of populism. (20.5.2019b)

According to the article, former Belgian PM Guy Verhofstadt accused populist politicians of receiving funding from the Kremlin. To discredit this claim, the article continues that:

Having learned nothing from almost three years of promoting the ‘Russian collusion’ conspiracy, the New York Times is now amplifying it in Europe. A feature published on Sunday contains all the well-worn tropes about the “*far-right*” parties threatening the continental utopia, including that Salvini “*once wore a Putin T-shirt*” and that Le Pen’s party “*once received loans from a Russian state bank.*” (20.5.2019b; emphasis in original text)

Thus, from RT’s point of view, the only evidence connecting those parties with Russia lie in wearing a T-shirt or receiving loans, yet the mainstream media is attempting to argue the opposite in order to gain support for the EU establishment. RT further repeats this same narrative and Verhofstad’s claims in two more articles (21.5.2019c; 21.5.2019d). This again constructs the hegemonic and antagonistic narratives in both dimensions of this research; it attacks the mainstream media and the establishment, while providing support for the anti-establishment and alternative media outlets. The repetition can be seen as trying to amplify the antagonistic narrative in order to combat the hegemonic narrative. The concept of salience emerges again in the repetition; the support for the anti-establishment and alternative media is given more coverage, thereby possibly aiming to persuade the readers to adopt the positive view on them as well.

A particularly interesting article on this theme is written just before the climax of the elections. Written by RT’s deputy editor in chief, Anna Belkina, the article focuses again on justifying why the EU establishment was wrong in assuming Russian interest in the elections.

Last-ditch efforts by the European intelligence community, politicians and the mainstream media to find the “Russian trail” ahead of the EU parliamentary elections lead to nowhere.

They tried. They really tried. (22.5.2019c)

Again, the antagonistic narrative is constructed by making explicit that the establishment as well as the mainstream media was, or is, actively and falsely turning to Russia to maintain their hegemonic position against the rise of populism. The article directly frames RT as a victim:

Accusations against Russian media and, specifically RT, often took center stage. Now, hundreds of conferences, articles and speeches later, and with just a couple of days to go

until the European Parliamentary elections; shock horror there is no evidence of interference. (22.5.2019c)

By discrediting the allegations about Russian interference and emphasising the timing of such attempts, RT can increase its credibility and decrease that of the establishment or mainstream media. It is even brought up that the President of France is “obsessed” with the idea of Russian interference, to which Belkina replies:

This should not come as a surprise. Mr. Macron’s 2017 campaign at times looked like it was running not against its political opponents but against RT, which it repeatedly accused of spreading “*fake news*” about the then-presidential candidate, despite having failed to produce a single example to date. (22.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

It is again pointed out that RT in particular is a victim of hostility from the establishment, as it is claimed to spread fake news – even though, according to Belkina, such evidence does not exist. This further brings up the juxtaposition between the hegemonic and antagonistic discourses.

This setup is strengthened as Belkina begins to break down a report produced by the BBC, which questions the possibility of Russian interference in the elections. In the report, the BBC is quoted to state that there is little evidence pointing towards a large-scale disinformation campaign directed at the European Parliamentary elections. It is also quoted that certain politicians have been defamed due to alleged connections with Russia, to which Belkina replies:

This is essentially an admission that some politicians cry “*Russian fake news*” when they don’t like coverage about them or their policies. That’s the nature of contemporary political life, it seems. (22.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

Now, RT has evidence that it is actually the mainstream media and the establishment that are spreading false information for their benefit, and not the anti-establishment or Russia. This can be viewed as an attempt to change the hegemonic narrative.

The article also criticises the East Stratcom task force as well as the EU vs Disinfo² project for only looking at Russian media outlets as the producers of disinformation. It is stated that:

East Stratcom de facto admits that despite its project’s name, it is not fighting disinformation, it is fighting Russia. It is not about facts, but about politics. -- This double standard exposes

² The East StratCom Task Force was set up to address Russian disinformation; EUvsDisinfo is a project by the East StratCom Task Force that identifies and compiles disinformation spread by pro-Kremlin media outlets. The project has a database and produces articles and analyses regarding studying disinformation campaigns. More information available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>

the intellectual and ethical bankruptcy of this project in particular, and the general, self-destructing European establishment trend to label any inconvenient, uncomfortable reporting as “*Russian disinformation.*” (22.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

This further gives credibility to RT and other Russian news outlets. Referring to ‘Russian disinformation’ is framed only as a means for the establishment to discredit its opponent and thereby maintain its power. Belkina emphasises RT’s role as covering topics that the mainstream media chooses to ignore:

[...] RT simply covers the stories that already exist in Europe, but that others ignore. Which is what we have been saying all along [...] *It is an insult to millions of the EU citizens to broadly paint them as fringe and dismiss their concerns. Overlooking disagreeing voices is what has long undermined the media-political establishment, not RT.* (22.5.2019c; emphasis in original text)

With this, the reader is encouraged to believe that they will not get a truthful overview of what is happening in the world from news produced by mainstream media, for they are too focused on their own agenda and only put out what benefits them or the establishment. RT emphasises that there are millions of people in the EU wishing to hear opinions that disagree with those put forward by mainstream media or the establishment. Instead, the readers should rely on outlets such as RT, who can deliver news that the mainstream media refuses to publish – such as the success of the populist tide in the elections.

Thus, RT constructs an antagonistic narrative of the media as the bearer of ‘truth’. Additionally, the right-wing anti-establishment parties are portrayed as being able to overcome the centuries-long hegemony of the establishment without assistance from Russia, as all allegations are attempted to be de-proved. These construct a narrative that tries to change the hegemonic position of mainstream media and the EU establishment, forcing them to give up their power to antagonists.

In order to demonstrate how these hegemonies and antagonisms are formed, let us go back to the discourse theory. As discussed in Chapter 3, in the Gramscian view (cited in Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018), a discourse, ideology, or power structures arise from hegemony, thereby becoming what is constituted as common sense, hence influencing social order. According to Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) discourse theory, hegemonic discourses and consequently antagonisms are formed through nodal points, empty signifiers as well as logics of equivalence and difference. The meanings of nodal points are partially fixed, yet they are

surrounded by empty signifiers that are able to change their meaning depending on the context. The empty signifiers, if related to one another, form a logic of equivalence (e.g. Jacobs, 2018).

As can be implied from the analysis, in the context of this research ‘mainstream media’ and ‘the establishment’ can be seen as nodal points. The analysis showed that RT mostly attached negative attributes to these concepts, as they are framed as only enforcing their own agenda in order to hold onto their dominant position. Thus, some of the empty signifiers attached to both nodal points can be ‘accusing’, ‘hostile’, ‘biased’, ‘repressive’, ‘anti-Russia’, ‘anti-populist’, ‘fearmongering’. Through the process of articulation, the identity of these elements is stabilised. As these are applicable to both, they form a logic of equivalence.

As discourse theory states, a logic of equivalence always implies a logic of difference – an antagonistic discourse that is the hegemony’s fundamental ‘other’. Thus, from the logic of equivalence formed by the nodal points mainstream media-the establishment, arises the logic of difference of alternative media-anti-establishment. The logic of difference produces an antagonistic discourse, as was discussed in Chapter 4. The antagonistic discourse attempts to defeat the hegemonic discourse, which, in RT’s coverage of the European Parliamentary election, was eventually the case through the electoral success of right-wing the anti-establishment parties. Moreover, as was hypothesised in Chapter 3.2, the British Conservative came to represent the European establishment, while Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party was produced as its opposing ‘other’. The electoral defeat of the Conservatives and the success of Brexit Party and other right-wing anti-establishment parties represent the collapse of the hegemony of the EU establishment.

5. Discussion

This research aims at answering the question of how the notion of a collapsing EU establishment is constructed in RT's coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections. The analysis of the articles shows that, as was hypothesised, RT views the EU establishment and the mainstream media as those in the hegemonic position. The anti-establishment parties and alternative media are constructed as the antagonism to the hegemony – yet, by gaining significant electoral success, the anti-establishment parties were able to overcome the hegemony of the establishment. The alternative media, on the other hand, was able to point out the deficiencies of the mainstream media by providing support for the anti-establishment parties, which the mainstream media largely ignored. The analysis also showed that the two dimensions, mainstream media-alternative media and the establishment-anti-establishment, overlap.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, discourse theory has been applied to research on RT previously. However, the focus has been on the representations of Russia within RT, and to an extent RT's status as an antagonistic force to counter the hegemony of 'mainstream' media (Hutchings, 2018; Orttung and Nelson, 2019; Yablokov, 2015). The previous research has not looked at how Russia's 'other' – Europe – is constructed in RT's outputs. This research has filled this gap, thus making the research on RT more holistic.

Although discourse theory has been applied to research on RT previously, discourse-theoretical analysis has not been used in this context. Following Carpentier's (e.g. 2010, 2018) conceptualisation of DTA, the central concepts of discourse theory – in this case, hegemony and antagonism – were employed to analyse the ways in which the hegemony of the EU establishment and mainstream media and the antagonistic discourses of the anti-establishment and alternative media are constructed in RT's reporting. Consequently, the overturning of the hegemonic discourse by the antagonist discourse in RT's articles could be analysed. Hence, the application of DTA provides a new perspective on the research on RT, along with research on alternative media outlets in general. The use of discourse-theoretical analysis provides the opportunity to study media texts in close detail and without any presumptions of connections to governments, as the focus is on the text itself and not so much the context. Applying the central concepts from discourse theory, it can be examined how hegemony and antagonism

emerge in text produced by RT. Since RT does not make any explicit connections to the Kremlin in the texts, it is analysed as an independent actor.

The most significant difference that this research makes to the existing research on RT is that it focuses on how Europe is portrayed. The existing research, as outlined in the literature review, mostly focuses on how RT portrays Russia. It is valuable to understand how both are framed in order to seek for consistencies or inconsistencies. The previous research on RT often identifies that the West is framed in a critical and negative manner (e.g. Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Miazhevich 2014), yet the research does not dwell into *how* exactly the narrative of the West is produced.

The literature review identified some common strategies and narratives applied by RT. These include a strong pro-Russian perspective and the construction of Russia as a representative of morality and justice (Borchers, 2011), inconsistent narratives from multiple perspectives (Miazhevich, 2014) and accusing the West of being anti-Russian as well as decaying (Orttung and Nelson, 2019; Hutchings and Szostek, 2015). The results of this research repeat the narrative of Western decay and having an anti-Russian stance, as was shown by the denouncing of allegations of Russian involvement in the European Parliamentary elections and the celebration of the electoral loss of the EU establishment. A pro-Russian stance could also be identified in the defensive tone detectable in some of the articles in the dataset.

However, inconsistent narratives from multiple perspectives are virtually absent in the coverage of the European Parliamentary elections. Although many of the articles were neutral in tone and some contradictions could be identified, there were no clear pro-establishment articles, for instance. Additionally, Russia was not portrayed as a representative of morality and justice, but rather as a victim of hostility by the EU establishment. This became evident in the claims that the establishment referred to Russian interference whenever something that did not fit into their agenda occurred, such as the success of the right-wing anti-establishment parties. A possibility for future research could thus be to analyse how Russia is portrayed in the coverage of these elections, as there are many articles in the dataset that would be suitable for such analysis, to contribute to the existing literature on this topic.

In the literature review, it was noted that Rutland and Kazantsev (2016) stated RT's mission to be to break the monopoly of mainstream media outlets such as the BBC and CNN. The results

of the analysis support this claim. By discovering deficiencies in the mainstream media's publications, such as by pointing out weak evidence regarding Russian interference, the legitimacy of these outlets can be seen as eroding. Consequently, RT can be viewed as the carrier of 'truth'.

Rutland and Kazantsev (2016) along with Watanabe (2017), for instance, claim that the pro-Russian stance present in RT's publications refers to its role as the Kremlin's soft power tool. Yablokov (2015) argues that the populist and anti-elitist stance and the negative portrayal of the 'other' indicate RT's role as a public policy tool. Indeed, a strong anti-elite narrative was found in the analysis through the construction of hegemony and antagonism. However, the results of this analysis do not allow for the connection between RT and the Kremlin to be made. A separate study would be needed to analyse RT as a soft power or public diplomacy tool. Even then, RT should be considered first as an independent actor, as was the case in this research, before it can be examined whether it acts as the Kremlin's tool or not.

In Chapter 2, the role of individual journalists was also examined. Due to the changes in media ecology, resulting in the loss of control of states in the narratives produced by media outlets (Hutchings, 2018; Chatterje-Doody, 2018), individual journalists have a larger role in shaping the nature of reporting. In this dataset, the majority of articles were published without details of the author. However, an interesting finding is that while RT's editor-in-chief Simonyan has emphasized that RT is an independent broadcaster and should not be associated with the Kremlin, in this analysis articles which mention the name of the author tend to have a pro-Russian tone. An example of this is the article written by RT's deputy editor in chief, Anna Belkina (22.5.2019c) that was discussed in detail in Chapter 4.3.2. Another article, written by journalist Graham Dockery (12.5.2019c) was also noted to defend Russia against the allegations of its potential interference attempts. An exception to these, however, was an article by Slavoj Žižek (2.6.2019b), that criticized both the EU establishment as well as the anti-establishment. Future research could thus focus on what kind of narratives are produced by RT's journalists – pro-Russian or other.

Another aspect that was omitted in this research, but could be examined in future studies, is the role of gender and how it is constructed against hegemony and antagonism. From the analysis, it can be seen that women became the losers of the elections and men the winners; for instance, as Theresa May's conservatives were defeated in the British election, leading to May's

resignation as Prime Minister. On the other side, the Brexit Party and particularly its leader Nigel Farage became the heroes of the story with the ability to end the British establishment's centuries-long hegemony. Reading the articles in the dataset, it can be noted that France's Marine Le Pen is not framed in equally admiring terms as Nigel Farage, despite leading her party to electoral victory as well. There is thus a clear possibility to examine gender roles in RT's reporting.

This research thus encourages that RT is first separated from the Russian government, in line with Hutchings (2018). Assuming that RT is merely a 'propaganda mouthpiece' places a strong bias even before the analysis can begin. Only after RT's narratives and rhetoric has been analysed independently of the Kremlin a comparison can be made to the narratives and rhetoric present in Russian foreign policy, for instance, or conduct a deeper examination of RT's links to the Russian government.

An important finding of this study is that in only a handful of articles could the hegemonic and antagonistic discourses be identified in an explicit manner. It should be noted that in the analysis of the 'Russiagate' (Chapter 4.3), for instance, 15 articles out of 94 were included. Although the 15 articles explicitly portray an image of the Western hegemony both in the spheres of EU politics and media as collapsing due to the antagonistic narratives produced by the anti-establishment and alternative media, the majority of the articles do not portray this as strongly, some not at all. Many of the articles were, in the end, neutral in the tone. This is a finding that has been omitted in previous research and should be examined more closely in the future. Doing so will give a more comprehensive understanding of RT and state-owned alternative media outlets in general.

This research gives a framework for how such research could be conducted. However, it should also be considered what types of articles are more likely to receive more attention and reach a wider audience. Although only a small number of RT's articles give a strong and explicit portrayal of the collapse of the EU establishment as a consequence of the antagonistic narrative overturning the hegemonic one, it could be presumed that these are the articles that catch people's eyes rather than neutral articles. It is likely that these articles receive more attention in traditional, perhaps even 'mainstream' media, and especially in social media. Articles like these may circulate more widely across social media platforms, which then may affect people's opinion of and perspectives on RT. This, however, is a subject for other research. Nevertheless,

the findings of this research underline how crucial it is to deepen the understanding of RT as an actor in order to avoid stigmatising it as a ‘one-issue’ outlet.

6. Conclusion

This research has shown that in the coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, the notion of a collapsing EU establishment is constructed through the concepts of hegemony and antagonism. The mainstream media and the EU establishment were those with hegemonic power. The antagonist forces, right-wing anti-establishment parties and alternative media struggled to overturn this setup and overturn the hegemony of the establishment. The electoral success of the anti-establishment parties and the decline in the votes for the EU establishment ended the centuries-long hegemony of the establishment, thereby successfully changing the hegemonic narrative. Mainstream media, on the other hand, attempted to hinder the success of the anti-establishment parties by framing them in a negative manner and as Russia's puppets. Alternative media, including RT itself, was able to point this out and rise as the legitimate, truth-binding broadcasters. The narrative that emerged from the articles was that the mainstream media, along with the establishment, are hostile towards alternative media outlets such as RT and anti-establishment parties, as they challenge the existing power relations. By showing that the mainstream media or the establishment have no proof against their allegations and with the victory of the anti-establishment in the elections, the allegations were discredited.

The idea for this research emerged from the discussion surrounding Russian disinformation campaigns. As it is nearly impossible to detect disinformation, or even determine what could be classified as disinformation, this research takes a step back. The focus is on the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, for which Russia was believed to possibly attempt to interfere – for instance, by spreading false information on state-owned alternative media outlets such as RT. The literature review showed that the majority of the existing literature on RT presumes that it is inherently connected to the Kremlin and only putting out what the government wants, and analyses RT as such. This is problematic and forms a gap in the existing research, and therefore this research focused on RT as an actor independent of the Kremlin, and not as the Kremlin's soft power or public diplomacy tool.

The theoretical framework and methodology chosen for this research, discourse theory and discourse-theoretical analysis, allow for the examination of RT as independent from the Kremlin, as they allow to focus on what the texts produced by RT say. Applying the key concepts of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory, hegemony and antagonism, the construction of the notion of a collapsing EU establishment was analysed. Using discourse-

theoretical analysis, hegemony and antagonism found to be present in RT's publications during the European Parliamentary elections in two dimensions: the establishment versus the anti-establishment and mainstream media versus alternative media.

The analysis shows that in RT's coverage of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, the collapse of the EU establishment is constructed by the antagonists' ability to overturn the hegemonic narrative. The EU establishment had held the power for centuries, thereby dictating the hegemonic discourse and social order. The EU establishment was closely connected to mainstream media, which assisted in advancing the establishment's agenda. As per Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory, a hegemony always implies an antagonism. In this context, the antagonists were the right-wing anti-establishment parties, such as the Brexit Party and FPO, as well as alternative media outlets such as RT.

In the articles between April and June 2019, RT framed the EU establishment in a negative manner and the anti-establishment in a supportive, positive manner. RT pointed out that despite it was known that the anti-establishment parties were likely to gain considerable success in the elections, the mainstream media along with the establishment refused to accept it. Instead, the EU establishment blamed Russian involvement and support for the anti-establishment parties for their success, a narrative that was disseminated among mainstream media outlets. RT showed that there was little to no evidence of Russian involvement, and that scandals such as the Austrian video scandal were a set-up by the establishment to affect the results of the elections – resulting in the establishment and mainstream media outlets being the ones to spread disinformation. Despite these attempts, the anti-establishment gained significantly more votes than the establishment, which ended the centuries-long hegemony. The antagonistic discourse was thus able to overturn the hegemonic discourse.

The analysis also pointed out that many of the articles in the dataset were, in fact, neutral. In the analysis of hegemony and antagonism in relation to Russian interference, only 15 articles out of 94 were included. This does not imply that the rest of the articles were neutral, nor that RT itself is neutral – hegemony and antagonism were present in many other articles, too, along with a strong pro-Russia and EU (establishment)-negative stance. However, based on the results of this research it could be suggested that an overall image of RT's articles is drawn in future studies on RT's coverage of a specific issue or event.

This research has thus established a framework that can be employed in different contexts in future research. The combination of the software ATLAS.ti to assist in the coding process with qualitative methods increases the validity of the research. Especially in light of the 2020 US Presidential election, such a framework may provide useful in the analysis of the news coverage of the election. The framework can also be applied to different contexts in order to see if similar narratives or hegemony-antagonism juxtapositions are prevalent in RT's reporting. The framework is particularly useful for the analysis of articles published online – something that was lacking in the existing literature on RT.

Thus, this research has made a contribution to the existing research on RT by filling two gaps: analysing RT without assuming it functions as a 'propaganda machine' and how RT portrays Europe instead of Russia. Although it is not new information that RT tends to be more supportive towards anti-establishment parties than establishment parties, this research shows how exactly this division is constructed. By attaching negative empty signifiers, such as 'hostile', 'biased', 'repressive' and 'anti-Russia' to the framing of the EU establishment and mainstream media, the anti-establishment and alternative media, particularly RT, are mirrored in a more positive light. The anti-establishment and RT become to represent the true will of the people and carriers of 'truth'. The salience of drawing a negative image of the EU establishment and anti-establishment can be seen as increasing the credibility of the anti-establishment and RT in the eyes of the reader. A key message that this research delivers is that state-owned alternative media outlets should not be presumed to be political tools – instead, in this type of research it is, to quote RT, important to question more.

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Appendix 1. List of codes - screenshot from ATLAS.ti software

	<input type="radio"/> Ambiguous		7
	<input type="radio"/> Anti-immigration		6
	<input type="radio"/> Anti-left		1
	<input type="radio"/> Brexit		9
	<input type="radio"/> Changing hegemonic narrative		9
	<input type="radio"/> Conflict between establishment/populists		35
	<input type="radio"/> Connection between populists and Russia		3
	<input type="radio"/> Conspiracy		2
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Counter-accusation of meddling		5
	<input type="radio"/> Critical of liberal values		1
	<input type="radio"/> Defensive tone		17
	<input type="radio"/> Discrediting allegations about Russia's involvement		38
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Discrediting mainstream media		28
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> EU-negative		15
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Farage - good		8
	<input type="radio"/> Farage vs May		1
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Labour - bad		1
	<input type="radio"/> Mainstream vs. alternative media		8
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Negative portrayal of "establishment"		62
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Negative portrayal of populist right parties		12
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Neutral		20
	<input type="radio"/> Nigel Farage		5
	<input type="radio"/> Populists as victims of the establishment		9
	<input type="radio"/> Populists victorious over establishment		12
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Positive portrayal of populist parties		20
	<input type="radio"/> Pro-EU		1
	<input type="radio"/> Pro-Russia		6
	<input type="radio"/> Reference to meddling		4
	<input type="radio"/> RT as a target		5
	<input type="radio"/> Russia under attack		7
	<input type="radio"/> Russian interference		29
	<input type="radio"/> Strong language		14
	<input type="radio"/> Supporting populist parties		35